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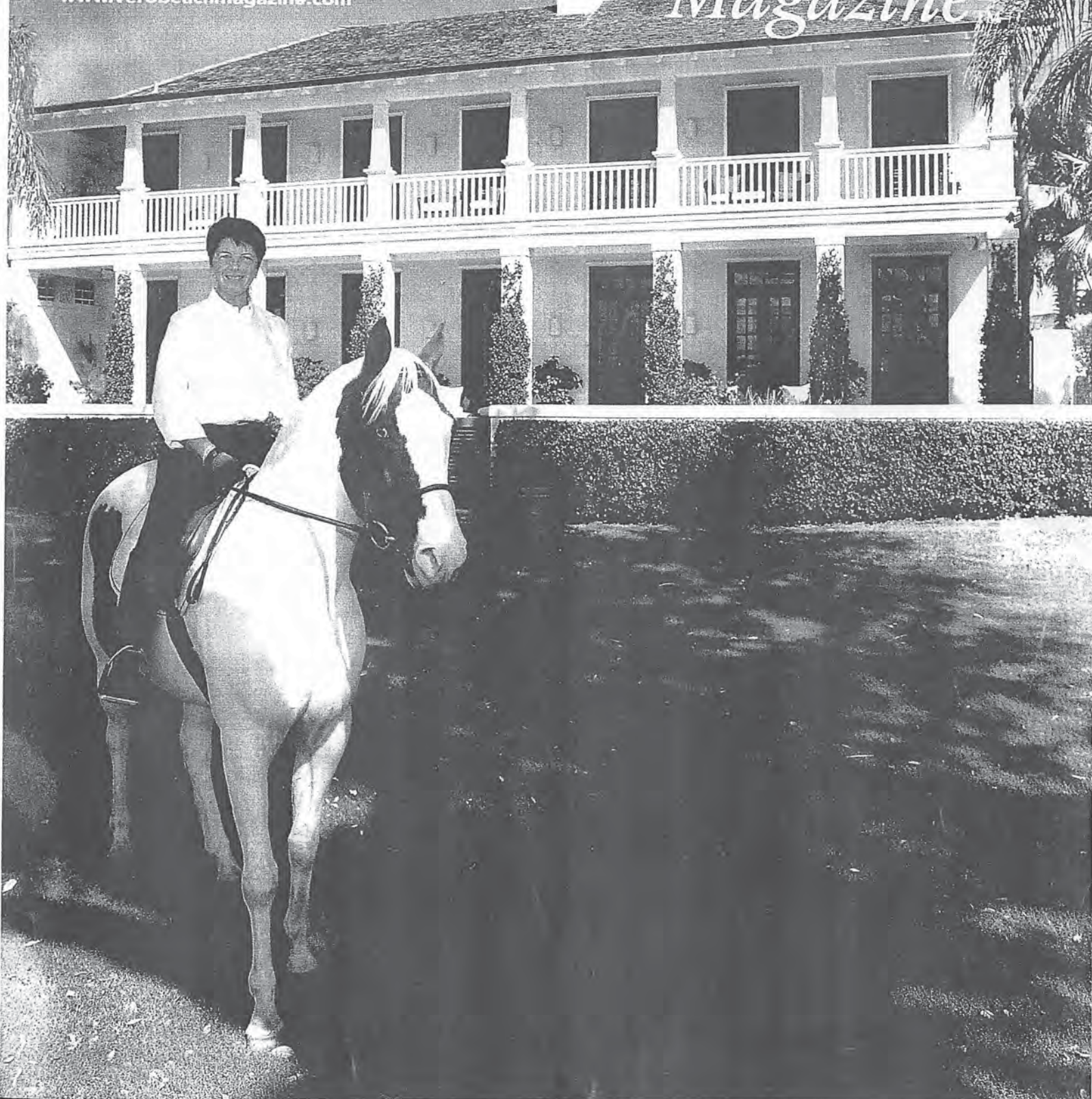
JANUARY 2002  
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## Magazine

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FORTY YEARS AFTER CASTRO CONFISCATED THEIR BREWERIES, BERTA BAUCHMAN'S FAMILY HAS REINTRODUCED THE RECIPE OF CUBA'S MOST POPULAR BEER, LA TROPICAL

## THE PERFECT BLEND OF PAST & PRESENT

BY DENISE WOLF  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB DOWNEY



Packaging of today's Tropical is identical to what was produced in Cuba, including the signature green bottle and artwork.

**B**eer is not a drink that Berta Bauchman favors. In fact she admits, "I don't really drink at all." But she had more reason than most to celebrate the recent introduction of La Tropical beer when it made its U.S. debut just a little more than two years ago. Cerveza La Tropical, currently being brewed in Tampa by La Tropical Brewery LLC, is a reinvention of a traditional Cuban recipe originally owned and brewed by her family, the Blanco-Herrerass in pre-Castro Cuba. It was the country's leading brewery until Castro confiscated it in 1960. But when Bauchman's father, Cosme Blanco-Herrera, fled to the United States with his family, he turned from beer to banking and the recipe lay dormant for nearly 40 years.





A 1938 souvenir photo card from Tropical Garden with Berta's father Cosme Blanco-Herrera, seated, surrounded by family and friends.



Havana 1951: Berta at home with her parents and brother, Ramon Blanco-Herrera.

Enter Manuel Portuondo, a young Cuban-American entrepreneur and one-time marketing manager for Anheuser-Busch. He chanced on the U.S. trademark back in 1998, and insists it was fate. "La Tropical is the stuff of legend," says Portuondo. "I was just the one who was able to bring the people together who were needed to make this happen." One of those people was Ramon Blanco-Herrera, Bauchman's brother. When Blanco-Herrera decided to become an investor, he called on a long list of his father's employees, managers and family members to provide the family history, memorabilia, photographs and, most important, the original recipe.

Blanco-Herrera also delivered a connection to 84-year-old Julio Fernandez Selles, the former brew master at La Tropical in Havana from 1938 to 1960. Selles was able to guide the young group of investors in the proper selection of the original hops and two-row barley and offer insight into the original process. His involvement, says Portuondo, was a key factor in delivering an authentic reproduction of the original brew. "La Tropical brings back the flavor of a past distinguished by quality and *joie de vivre*," says Blanco-Herrera. "That's why, when we open a bottle of La Tropical Pilsener, we will be tasting history."

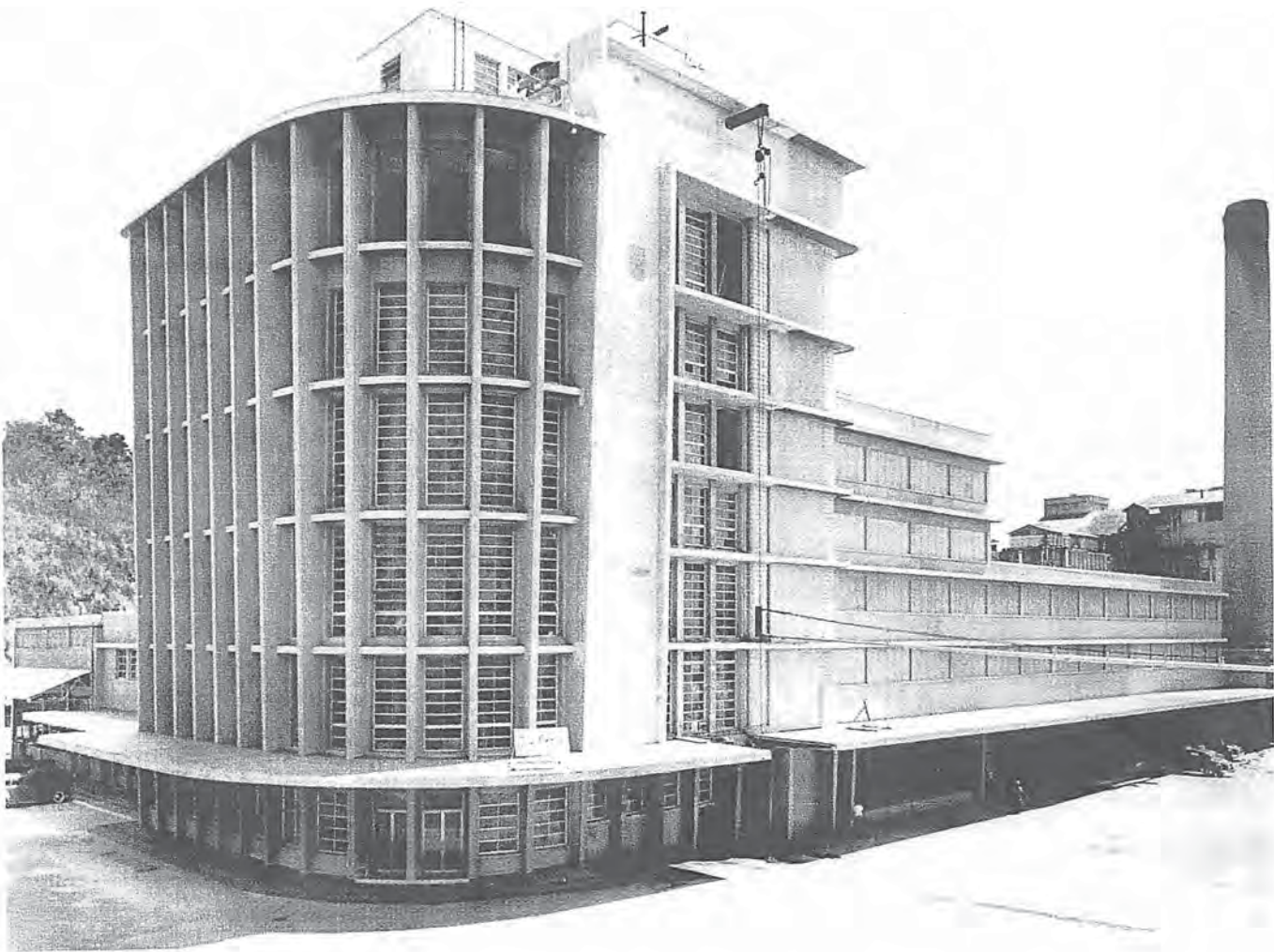
It is a strategy that appears to be working well. Targeting the 1.4 million Hispanics in South Florida, La Tropical has been gaining popularity among them and in the market in general, with a fervor. "Most of our market is too young to remember the original beer," says Portuondo, "but chances are they've heard about La Tropical from their grandparents." Leading the country in sales, La Tropical beer was a favorite throughout Cuba and beyond. Throughout its history, it received numerous national and international awards: the "Grand Prix," International Exposition, London, 1896; "First Prize," International Exposition, Brussels, 1897;





Vero Beach 2001: Berta at home today with, from left, her son Steven, mother Chona Rabelo de Blanco Herrera and son Robert.





By 1958, La Tropical Brewery was producing 58 percent of all the beer made in Cuba.

"Bronze Medal," Universal Exposition, New York, 1901; "Grand Prize," Universal Exposition, St. Louis, 1904; "Grand Prix," Munich, 1906; "Grand Prize," Havana, 1909; "Grand Prize," Cuba 1911; and "Grand Prix," Paris, 1912. By 1958, the factory was producing 58 percent of the island's annual beer production with brands such as La Tropical, Cristal, Tropical 50 and Maltina, a non-alcoholic brew.

True to its original recipe, in its present form the beer recently received the "Award of Excellence" in the Pilsener beer category by the American Tasting Institute, and appears to be as pleasing to

the palate as it is to the soul. La Tropical is classified as a "Pilsener" style beer as identified by its golden color, foamy head and elegant body. Full-bodied, with a strong, clean imported taste, La Tropical provides a pleasant drinking experience. It is noticeably stronger than most standard domestics and, according to the brewery professionals, "its rich body leaves delicate patterns of "Brussels lace" (small bubbles of foam) in the glass, an indicator of the high quality and freshness." To the average beer lover, it's just a strong, clean beer with a bright future.

Given the explosive growth of the Latin beer import category, and in the





A 1950s celebratory party at the Cuban restaurant La Barraca in New York for the introduction of Cristal, a new beer, to the U.S.: (back row from left) Cuban consul, Alfredo Hernandez; Berta's mother, Chona Rabelo de Blanco Herrera;

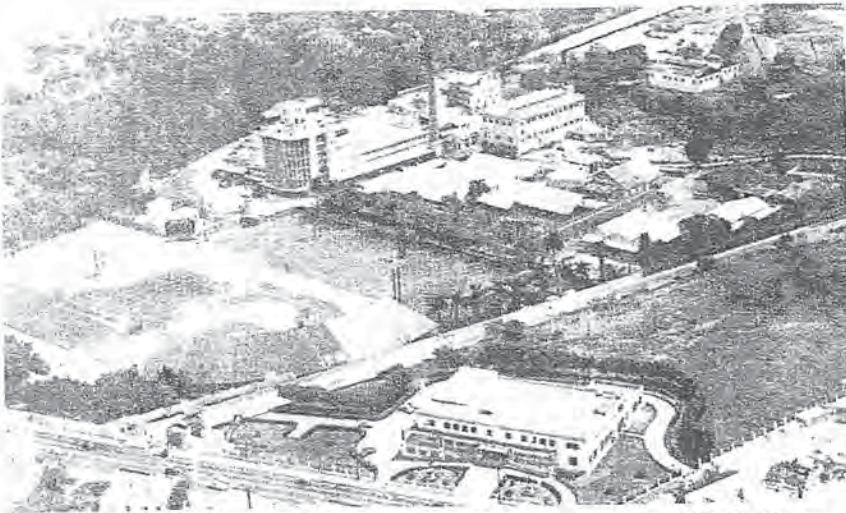
Berta's father, Cosme Blanco Herrera; Anita Pelsman; Morris Pelsman, distributor of Cristal in New York; and Sonia Ellis of the newspaper *Diario de Nueva York*.



Berta's father with officials from their brewery in October, 1955.

U.S. Hispanic population — seven times the growth rate of the general market — La Tropical stands a very good chance of success. Portuondo is also counting on a current chic trend that is sweeping the nation. "There's an interest in all things Cuban," says Portuondo, "that romantic, exotic, mystical feel." Recently La Tropical Brewery secured an agreement with Fisher Beverages International, an affiliate of Heineken, to distribute the beer to Cuban restaurants nationally. "Cuban restaurants, like the popular Calle Ocho in Manhattan, are springing up all across the United States," says Portuondo. "The clientele isn't necessarily Cuban but they go there for the Cuban food and ambiance." And Portuondo hopes, for the beer.





The ultramodern plant for La Tropical opened in 1958. It is now being leased by the Castro government to a Canadian brewery.



The original La Tropical brewery, above, was opened in 1888 and was later replaced by a much larger plant, below.



For Bauchman the beer also represents more than just taste. While she was too young when her family's brewery operated to have tasted the original recipe, she fondly remembers mixing the brewery's non-alcoholic "Maltina" with condensed milk to produce a smooth, sweet, refreshing drink. "This new beer is good," she says, looking a little embarrassed as she admits that, as a non-drinker, she's tried only a sip. But Bauchman, like many others, welcomes the beer, not so much for the taste, but for the memories.

She still recalls the date they fled Cuba: November 9, 1960. "I went to school just the day before," she says "and we thought we might be gone for maybe a week." Although it has stretched into over 40 years, Bauchman is still longing for a return visit — when Castro's reign is over. "I would like to see my grandfather's house," she says. "But mostly I want to visit the beaches and the ocean."

Bauchman fled to Miami with her father shortly after their business was confiscated. "I was only a young girl," she says, "but they strip searched me anyway." In order to secure papers that would allow them to leave the country, they were forced to turn over their home

with all of the contents intact. Her mother, Chola, remained in the country to pack the house and salvage their personal belongings. "I remember when she arrived at the Miami airport just a week before Christmas," says Bauchman, "she had 19 duffel bags stuffed with our belongings."

Judging from the look on her face, the memories of that day and the days that would follow are painful still. "We came to Miami without speaking the language," she says. Bauchman also talks about the difficulties — beyond not knowing the language — of not knowing the system. It was to be, for the Blanco-Herrerias and others like them, a time of incredible change and, says Bauchman, of incredible growth.

"Ours was a magical childhood," she says, recalling serene, sun-filled days in the tropical climate of her homeland. "I was very young, but I remember some of it." Her voice trails off wistfully as she recalls. Her family was the Cuban equivalent of the Anheuser-Busch family. Like Busch, they owned Cuba's premier brewery, Nueva Fabrica de Hielo, S.A., or New Ice Factory, founded in 1888 on a large parcel of land situated along the banks of Havana's Almendares River. The grounds of the brewery, were nothing less than spectacular. Designed in an elegant Moorish architectural style, imitating the famous Alhambra de Granada in Spain, the grounds eventually became a large conglomerate of workshops, warehouses, labs, shipping vessels, train stations, parks, gardens, castles and terraces.

Bauchman flips through the pages of a Cuban history book and fondly recalls the Garden's history as a popular meeting place where young twenty-something Habaneros would gather. On Sunday nights, legendary bands like Beny More, the top Cuban singer in the '50s, and the Aragon Orchestra of cha, cha, cha fame would keep the rhythm going for hundreds of revelers who came to dance the rumba, danzon and paso doble. "It's fun



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to hear people talk about the dances at the Garden," she says. "They'll mention the Garden and say, 'Oh, yes, I met my wife there,' or 'We got engaged there.'" It was the happening place to be during the 1950s. She recalls carefree visits to the Gardens and her father's offices when she and her girlfriends would take turns hiding in the warehouse with the blocks of ice – huddling inside until they shivered and retreated in giggles to the warmth of the Cuban afternoon sun.

She is fierce in her defense of the family business and the life of which she and her family were robbed. "It's like I tell my kids," she said, "this is a business that was built not from stolen money, dirty money or drug money, but something the family built up from honest means." She has personally researched both family and business history during long hours spent at the University of Miami library, and

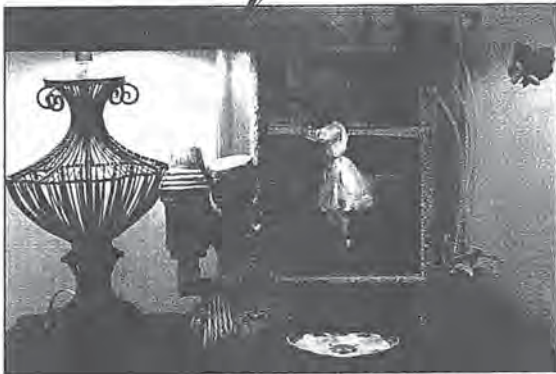
has stacks of public records that provide details back to the initial \$20,000 investment made by her great-grandfather in 1888.

"The business paid almost \$3 million in taxes in 1953," she says, firing off a line of figures that offer proof of the contribution her family made to their community. She talks with pride about the school that was built to educate the employees of her family's brewery. "Our shoemaker in Miami stopped my mother one day and said, 'I learned how to repair shoes at that school. If it weren't for that I wouldn't be able to do what I do.'" But Bauchman understands that all of that is merely history — something that can only offer guidance in how to live today.

Like so many of her fellow Cuban exiles, Bauchman's family quickly made the best of their plight. Her father was able to successfully make the transition

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into a banking career while she and her brother continued their education. In Miami, they were able to live a lifestyle similar to the one they left in Cuba, where family and friends provided a social structure and a strong sense of security. Bauchman eventually graduated from the University of Miami and has lived in both the Midwest and abroad, but throughout it all, the cords and friendships of her birth remain strong.

Her Cuban ancestry provides subtle overtones in the décor of her Vero Beach home, where giant live oak trees provide a protective canopy and project an old-world elegance. It is evident in her understated and relaxed decorating style and it is evident in the way she greets her guests.

She is a consummate hostess. As she works to prepare coffee *con leche*, she continues entertaining — asking questions, remembering anecdotes of her childhood — while heating the milk and stirring in the sweet brown sugar until she achieves a tawny froth. She is modest in her recollections, praising the courage of her parents' generation. "I take my hat off to them," she says. "They had the courage to rebuild when they were left with nothing."

Speaking with a gentle lilt in her voice and only a hint of her native Cuba in the words she chooses, Bauchman projects an image of a woman who is comfortable with herself and wants to make others feel the same. Before the end of the meeting, she has carefully prepared a care package filled with delicious homemade specialties: black bean soup, chocolate-covered Cuban cookies and her very own picadillo. "It's a lot like sloppy joes," she says, "I think your kids will like it." She appears to want to share her love of things from her past — but in her own gracious manner — only to those who show an interest.

In her present life she is the wife of Robert "Bob" Bauchman, president and CEO of Northern Trust Bank, Vero Beach. She is mother to three boys: Robert, 19, Christopher, 18, and Steven, 13, to whom she has passed on the strong family values and traditions, as well as the language. She has insisted that they learn Spanish and encourages them to continue to practice it often. She believes that being bilingual can offer tremendous advantages. She remains close to her mother and other family members who live in Miami and is very involved with the Treasure Coast Chapter of the Alumnae Association of the Sacred Heart. "Our alumnae association is very close knit," says Bauchman. "It's a bond. You can go to Paris and run into an alumnae from the Philippines and there is an immediate connection." Connections and belonging, it seems, are vitally important to Bauchman.

While she is employed as a part-time translator, her real



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work centers on her family, her church, the Holy Cross Catholic Church in Vero Beach, and her charity work. "Wherever she is she'll find a way to help those in need," says Mary Fran Griffith who heads up the local chapter of the Alumnae Association. Currently, Bauchman is taking the lessons learned through the charity of her family and applying them locally. She has been instrumental in developing the Fellsmere Community Enrichment Program (FCEP), a program that works to provide low-cost housing, education and health care services to migrant workers in Fellsmere. She serves on the FCEP committee as a representative of Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission.

Recently, the FCEP secured a \$2.5 million federal grant that will provide low-cost housing for migrant workers and their families. A parish center, made possible through Our Lady of Guadalupe

Mission, was finished last February and provides a variety of services. Through a cooperative effort with Indian River Community College, Juan Rodriguez, an instructor provided by IRCC, teaches English to 112 Spanish-speaking immigrants. A day-care center operating in the parish center provides care for preschool age children. "These people come to the United States and depend on their church to give them the assistance they need," says Griffith. And, Griffith suggests, it is people like Bauchman who make it all possible.

Each Sunday the migrant workers of Fellsmere congregate within the Spanish-style church with a bright red roof. They attend church and then wander into the parking lot where tables are loaded with clothing that has been donated. Each of the items carries a small price tag, something nominal, but a cost

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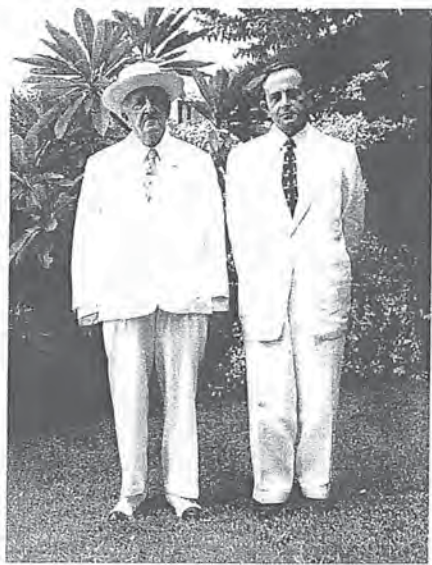
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Berta's grandfather and father, Ramon and Cosme Blanco Herrera

just the same. Griffith says, "It's important to them that they are able to pay for their items." Frequently many of the clothing items have been gathered and delivered by Bauchman. "My mother teases me that I collect these donations," she says, "I am always carrying them around."

During her weekly trips to Miami where she is taking classes, Bauchman frequently stops by a convent to assist the work of the Sisters of Charity. "I donate money, pick up clothing from whoever will donate it, and drop it off at the mission." She also helps a priest who works with missions in Africa and Colombia. She is obviously not a woman who refuses requests easily — particularly when they come from her family. When her son requested a special delivery of her homemade black bean soup, she packaged it up and carried it on the plane. "I was worried what they might think at security," she laughs.

Not long ago, Berta Bauchman found herself on the deck of a cruise ship, gazing across the crystal blue Caribbean waters onto the homeland from which she was whisked away just over 40 years ago. "The captain had told us we would be passing within sight of Havana," says Bauchman softly, "and I so wanted to see it again." Bauchman rarely allows herself to be nostalgic. "I don't want to live in the past," she says. But, like the beer for which her family became famous, there is an obvious comfort in the manner in which she has blended the memories of her past with the notions of her present. And, for Bauchman and those around her, it seems to be a mixture that utilizes the best of both.



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